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August 31, 1999

Jane Henney, M.D.
Commissioner USFDA
5600 Fishers Lane
Room 1471
Rockville, MD. 20857

Dr. Henney:

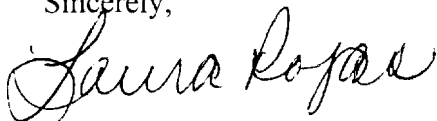
I am writing to you today in reference to an issue of great concern to myself, as well as, I am sure, to others. That issue is the labeling of genetically altered foods.

Enclosed is a copy of an article recently published in "Healthy Living", magazine. I strongly believe that manufacturers, food producers, distributors, and etc. must label their products, accordingly; and the consumer has the right to choose whether to use these products or not. I also believe that once these products are labeled properly, and their use disclosed in the market place, their demand will be greatly diminished.

Ever since reading this article I have asked everyone I know if they would consume these foods, and the answer has been a resounding "NO" from each and every person. There are enough allergies, illnesses, and incurable diseases already out there, that cause an awful lot of suffering, and expense, to add any more to the list.

Once the DNA has been changed, there is no turning back. It is impossible to predict what can, or will derive from this, or if we'll even be able to handle the problems once they arise. I have worked in the pharmaceutical industry for years, and have always supported the FDA's efforts to protect the often "unwilling to be protected" consumer. I urge you to seek legislation that requires the labeling, and the disclosure regarding the use of any of these foods, as well, as the alteration of DNA in any living organisms.

Sincerely,



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COMING SOON TO A SUPERMARKET NEAR YOU

Commonly known as Frankenfoods, bioengineered food results when the genes of a plant are spliced with, well, something you'd probably rather not eat. Corn bred with the DNA of a virus, to make it better able to resist disease, for example. Or potatoes bred with a pesticide. Sound unappetizing? Don't bother checking the packaging in an effort to dodge these ingredients. They come to you unlabeled—and may well be a threat to your health.

By Mindy Pennybacker

Illustrations by Victoria Kann

Think the issue of bioengineered foods is of interest to scientists and farmers only? Think again—about what you had to eat today. Soy? Corn on the cob? Potato salad? Milk?

If you said yes to any of the items on this menu, there's a good chance you've consumed food that was bioengineered, a process that involves splicing the DNA from a particular plant (a tomato, for instance) with that of a seemingly incompatible species (a fish, say, for its cold-resistant qualities) . . . or worse. For example, soy seeds made by the Monsanto Company, an agrochemical giant, and planted in at least half of America's 70 million acres of soybean crops have been spliced with a bacteria-containing compound. If that thought doesn't appeal, you'll probably also want to pass on the corn and potatoes that are classified as "pesticidal" by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): They've been spliced with the DNA of the toxin-producing bacteria *Bacillus thuringiensis*, or Bt.

And don't think bioengineered food—also called genetically modified organisms, or GMOs—begins and ends in the produce aisle. The dairy case, for instance, is full of milk, cheese, and yogurt from

Genetically engineered food at a glance

FRANKENFOODS

cows that have been injected with a genetically engineered compound called recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH, another Monsanto product), designed to boost milk production—a process banned in both Canada and Europe. Waiting in the wings are other disquieting foodstuffs: Potatoes containing chicken DNA is one, says Rebecca Goldburg, a biologist with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). Fish spliced with a human-growth-hormone gene *is* another.

This bounty—current and future—comes to us courtesy of the self-proclaimed “life sciences” industry, whose goal it is to improve upon nature by guarding against crop diseases and failure so that, spokespeople maintain, farmers are better able to feed the world’s burgeoning poor. While no one would argue against the stated mission, critics claim that the process and the products of biotechnology have **been** inadequately tested for human safety. Actress Meryl Streep—a cofounder of Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet, a nonprofit consumer-education organization—is one such critic. She started Mothers & Others, in 1989, out of a concern over the use of Alar and other pesticides in our food supply. **GMOs** scare her in part because once genes drift from farmers’ fields into the wild, nature is forever changed. Say a crop’s DNA is altered to withstand an herbicide. Say, too, the crop

is bordered by an uncultivated field **populated by** a wild plant **that’s** a relative of the first crop’s, thus making cross-pollination a possibility. If this occurs, the “drift” of the altered DNA might result in a hardy super-weed that could make kudzu look like a wimp.

“Biotechnology adds new and heretofore unknown risks to the threats posed by synthetic pesticides,” Streep says. “Once altered genetic material is released into the environment, there’s no way we can stop it or call it back—and that should give us pause.”

The fight for labeling: Are you allergic to petunias?

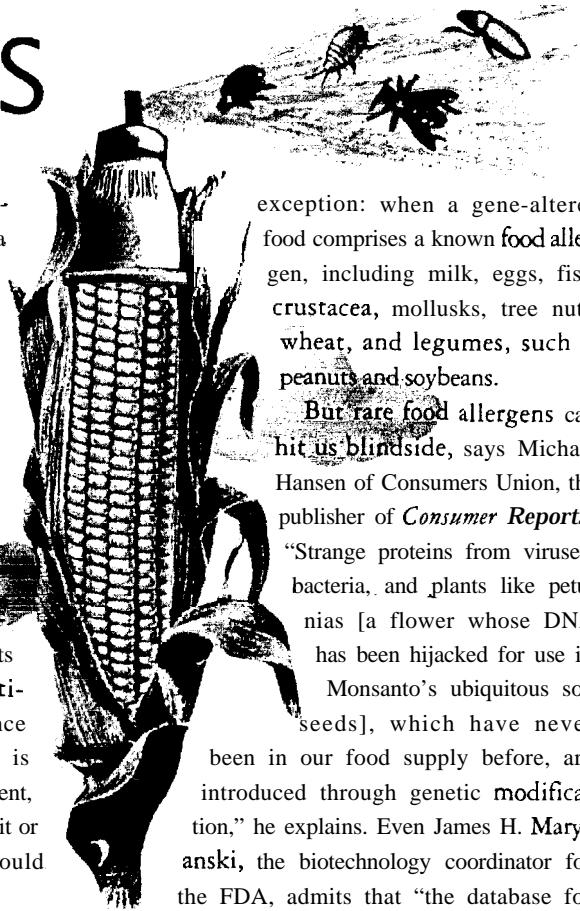
Cornflake manufacturers are required to list on their boxes the amount of calories and fat contained therein. Vintners must label their bottles with a warning about alcohol consumption and its risks to pregnant women. But you won’t find the words “bioengineered” or “contains genetically modified organisms” on packaging here in the U.S., because the FDA exempts the process from its labeling laws. The

exception: when a gene-altered food comprises a known food allergen, including milk, eggs, fish, crustacea, mollusks, tree nuts, wheat, and legumes, such as peanuts and soybeans.

But rare food allergens can hit us **blindsight**, says Michael Hansen of Consumers Union, the publisher of *Consumer Reports*.

“Strange proteins from viruses, bacteria, and plants like petunias [a flower whose DNA has been hijacked for use in Monsanto’s ubiquitous soy seeds], which have never been in our food supply before, are introduced through genetic modification,” he explains. Even James H. Maryanski, the biotechnology coordinator for the FDA, admits that “the database for food allergens is not complete” and that “someone somewhere might be allergic to . . . petunias.”

Allergies aren’t the only concern. When Canada banned the use of bioengineered rBGH to boost milk production in dairy cattle early in 1999, it cited a long list of objections to the compound, including the fact that rBGH is linked with increased infections among cows, infections typically treated with antibiotics. Those drugs, in turn, can be passed along to humans via dairy products. The big-picture risk to this



GMOs: how to avoid them

scenario: Overconsumption of antibiotics can trigger the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria—new, so-called “superbugs” that science hasn’t figured out how to fight. We are also at risk of drinking in increased levels of the insulin-like growth factor IGF-1, a component of rBGH, which may result in higher incidences of colon, breast, and prostate cancers.

Biotechnology presents philosophical dilemmas as well: For vegetarians and people whose religious beliefs forbid eating animals, the still-in-the-labs potato with chicken genes and tomato with fish genes would be taboo—but there’d be no way of singling them out in the vegetable bin. Biotech companies duck this issue by stating that they don’t kill animals when extracting genetic material. Still, **Goldburg** and other labeling advocates uphold the position

that the consumer has the right to decide.

Public opinion seems to be on their side: According to a nationwide poll published in *Tim* this past January, 81 percent of respondents indicated that they’d like GMOs to be labeled, and 58 percent said that if they saw such a label, they would not buy the product. This is, of course, what the industry fears, says Charles Margulis of Greenpeace.

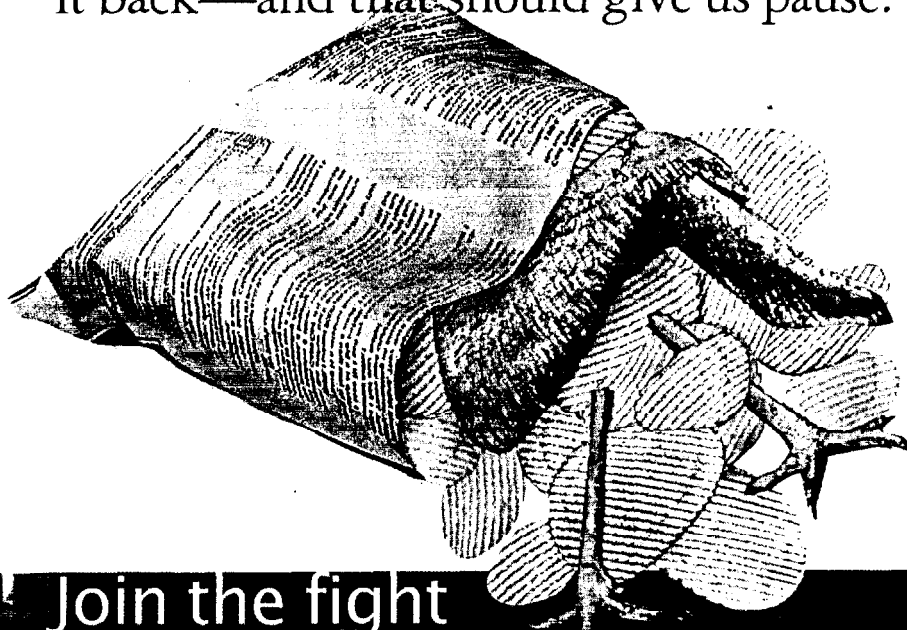
Planetary problems—yes, in our backyard

Longtime organic-foods proponent Prince Charles voiced his reservations about biotechnology in London’s *Daily Telegraph* last summer: “If something does go badly wrong we will be faced with the problem of clearing up a kind of pollution which is self-perpetuating. I am not convinced that

anyone has the first idea of how this could be done, or who would have to pay.”

Closer to home, North Dakota-based organic farmer and organic certifier Frederick Kirschenmann feels that the greatest danger biotechnology poses may be the way it contributes to the farming of vast “monocrop” (translation: “one crop”) tracts. “This is threatening the diversity of our food supply, with potentially ruinous effects,” says Kirschenmann—effects akin to those of the 19th-century Irish potato famine and the U.S. corn blight in the 1970s. In both cases, only a single variety had been planted, and each proved vulnerable to a pest. The solution, of course, is to plant many varieties next time around. But will we be able to? Today, because our seed stock is consolidated in just a few multinational corporations, a dwindling of seed diversity is inevitable.

“Once altered genetic material is released into the environment, there’s no way we can stop it or call it back—and that should give us pause.” —Meryl Streep



Join the fight AGAINST GMOs

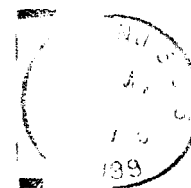
- To write to the FDA to express your concern about GMOs in our food supply, address your letter to: Jane Henney, M.D., Commissioner of USFDA, 5600 Fishers Lane, room 1471, Rockville, MD 20857.
- Add your name to the list of consumers who would like all GMOs to be labeled. Petition signatures are being collected by the Campaign to Label Genetically Engineered Foods (www.thecampaign.org).

Monsanto has bought up more than \$8 billion worth of large seed companies in the past two years. This past March, DuPont, another leader in agricultural chemicals, acquired Pioneer Hi-Bred International, the world’s largest producer of seed corn. “The pact . . . effectively divides most of the U.S. seed industry between DuPont and Monsanto,” *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

At this point, consumers often feel the compulsion to give up—what power do individuals have in a war waged against a movement of this magnitude? The answer: A lot. In fact, an international food fight is well under way. In response to consumer demand, the 15-country European Union now requires labeling of foods containing GMOs, and in April Unilever UK and Nestle UK—divisions of the world’s two largest food producers—announced plans to phase out GMOs. In America the battle is focused on mandatory labeling, which would grant consumers the chance to choose whether or not they buy and eat genetically altered food. Want to learn more about how to ensure your right to do so? See “Join the Fight Against GMOs,” at left. 🐾

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